



# Exploring the Aesthetic Characteristics of Qingzhen Ci

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**Abstract.** As the pinnacle of the graceful and restrained school of Chinese poetic genres, the Qingzheng Ci have taken over and accommodated the strengths of the early Northern Song dynasty's graceful and restrained poetic genres, while forming a school of their own, which has had far-reaching effects on the Southern Song dynasty and even on later generations of the development and condition of Ci-poems. From the end of the Northern Song Dynasty to the present day, Chinese academics have made a variety of positive and negative comments on the Qingzhen Ci, especially in the last hundred years, which have been fluctuations under the influence of ideology. However, no one in academia can deny that Zhou Bangyan has mature and unique aesthetic characteristics in his works. Except for the exquisite sound and rhythm, the status of Qingzhen Ci in the world of Ci-poems is also quite distinctive in terms of the content of the lyrics. Starting from the text of Qingzhen Ci, this paper summarises the three major aesthetic features of Qingzhen Ci: firstly, the skilful use of circular chapter structure; secondly, the elegant, refined, fluent and natural language; and thirdly, the subtle and condensed way of expression that integrates feelings into matters. These features greatly contribute to the process of elegance of the Ci-poems and greatly enhance their thickness and depth.

**Keywords:** Zhou Bangyan; Qingzheng Ci; aesthetic features; language arts

## 1 Introduction

Zhou Bangyan (1056-1121), courtesy name Meicheng, a native of Qiantang (present-day Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province) and known as Qingzhen Jushi (Qingzhen Lay Buddhist), was a famous poet at the end of the Northern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) in China, whose works of Ci-poems are collectively referred to as the Qingzhen Ci. Zhou Bangyan grew up in the prosperous and beautiful Qiantang area and therefore had a refined and romantic character. He often hung around in music halls and was proficient in music. Zhou Bangyan's literary style was inherited from the late Tang Dynasty's Huajian Ci and the early Northern Song Dynasty's Liu Yong and other lyricists of the graceful and restrained poetic genres and became a landmark figure in the process of the elegance of Song Ci. As a master of the Ci-poems of the Northern Song Dynasty, Zhou Bangyan not only developed his own style but also brought great influence to the Ci-poems of the Southern Song Dynasty. Almost all the critics would praise the words

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of Zhou Bangyan, and Wang Guowei even called Zhou Bangyan "the DuFu in the world of Ci-poems", putting Zhou Bangyan in the same position as DuFu, the Sage of Poets in China.

Zhou Bangyan's Ci-poems have been honoured as a model of Ci since the Southern Song Dynasty <sup>[1]</sup>. The musical and literal nature of Qingzhen Ci has left a mark on the history of Ci, and he has become a representative figure of the graceful and restrained poetic genres. Prior to the 1940s, Qingzhen Ci received mixed but more favourable reviews from academics. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Qingzhen Ci was unfairly criticised due to a number of historical and ideological reasons and prejudices. Because Zhou Bangyan once wrote a poem to celebrate the birthday of the treacherous minister Cai Jing, the academic debate mainly focused on Zhou's own character and the content of his words. Zhou's Ci-poems were regarded by academics as only focusing on technique. After the 1980s, the evaluation of Qingzhen Ci gradually returned to fairness.

At present, there are about 2,000 papers related to Zhou Bangyan and Qingzhen Ci that can be searched in the database. In addition to the controversy over his character and the meaning of his words, the aesthetic and artistic characteristics of the Qingzhen Ci have always been affirmed by academics and Zhou's role as a bridge between the Northern Song Ci and the Southern Song Ci has also been affirmed <sup>[2]</sup>. The study of Zhou Bangyan focuses mostly on his life and character. The study of Qingzhen Ci focuses mostly on a certain aspect of artistic skill or the aesthetic appreciation of a particular Ci. This paper plans to put aside the long-lost issues about temperament and to integrate the scattered aesthetic features, and present them in the same article by analysing its chapter structure, descriptive techniques and language refinement.

## 2 Circular chapter structure

The most distinctive feature of the structure of Qingzhen Ci is the "circular structure", which was proposed by Yuan Xingpei, in contrast to the "linear structure" of Liu Yong, who is a famous lyricist of the early Northern Song Dynasty. Linear structure is the traditional literary creative method, which can be summarised as writing a scene to start - turning to the narrative - ending with lyricism. The circular structure can be interpreted as breaking the linear template, diversifying and complicating the narrative so that the story bounces around and leaps back and forth between the present and the past.

### 2.1 Complex and rhythmic Mancì

Ci was originally used as songs to be sung in harmony at banquets, so a Qupai (the name of the tunes) is a Cipai, and different Ci have different metrical and the number of word requirements. Among them, the Mancì are those with a slower tempo according to a longer tune and are usually longer in length, suitable for expressing complex emotions. Most of the Mancì in Qingzhen Ci are characterised by complexity and rhythmicity. On the one hand, Zhou inherits and learns from Liu's technique of narration in bold detail. On the other hand, he also adds his own style, which is well-constructed and rhythmic, showing the complexity and encirclement of the nature

of the novel. Zhou is good at breaking the continuity of the plot, using flashbacks, interpolations and other techniques to disrupt the order of time and space so that the story overlaps and interlaces, and the rhetorical structure is complicated<sup>[3]</sup>. Qingzhen Ci is much more convoluted and subtle in its narrative and lyricism, constructing a three-dimensional structure, so it is usually considered to have a deep and hidden purpose<sup>[4]</sup>.

Time is generally seen as a line of continuous development, but this overlapping structure in space and time adopted by Zhou artistically embodies the discontinuity of time<sup>[5]</sup>. Through the flexible use of various temporal adverbs, Zhou contrasts the present and the past in the same space, forming a composite memory pattern, highlighting the untraceability of the past and the helplessness of the present, and revealing a sense of brokenness and disintegration in life. For example, in the Hillside Creek at Dusk, the first piece is written from the willows, and beyond the willows is an endless road. Then turning to the narrative, the green hills and the city are all in the author's eyes, but after ten years of wandering, the author, who has experienced the vicissitudes of life, thinks that his eyes are sick. For Zhou Bangyan, the capital has always been an important original space. The following piece is that Zhou returned to the familiar space called "Pingkang Alley" in the capital. The buildings and willows are still there, and the hills are also there so that his "sick eyes" a "bright". However, the past is fragmented and hard to find. The former taverns and stages are no longer there. Under the contrast between the present and the past, he can only be "standing empty" within the memories. As a rule, this is the time to express the feelings that things are different, but Zhou did not do so. He returned to reality, writing the present. It is still worth celebrating the reunion of friends. Then he ended abruptly, which greatly weakened the sadness of the previous article.

Zhou Bangyan is also good at combining the complexity of the chapter with the complexity of the way it is laid out, disrupting the story and hiding it in the chapter, and then connecting the characters and the scenery by using function words and time adverbs, building a time structure through scenery and emotion<sup>[6]</sup>. The Qingzhen Ci thus develops a distinctive net-like framework. That is to say, the frequent shifts in scene and jumps in time and space. The Qingzhen Ci discards the distinctive clues and strengthens the overlapping effect in the limited number of words. The whole Ci is like interconnecting several shots that are independent of each other through the sticky words of time and space<sup>[7]</sup>. For example, in Auspicious Dragon Chant - Zhangtai Road, the first paragraph starts with the current "Zhangtai Road", which usually refers to the gathering place of geisha. It indicates that the location is in a prosperous part of the city. The second sentence points out the season. The plum blossom has just faded, and the peach blossom has just bloomed, which is the scene of early spring. The phrase "still see" indicates that this is still the time to revisit the same place. The third sentence is to write the scene of the eyes. In the deep alley, the former residence is still there, and the swallows under the eaves return to their homeland in the spring, but the former person is nowhere to be found. In the second paragraph, the writer's mind goes blank as he is hit by the prospect of his eyes, with the action of "staring sadly". The author talks about the reason for his sadness and uses the word "remembering" to bring back to the past. He remembered that there was once a woman who was infatuated with this place, shy

but could not suppress her curiosity, quietly opened the door a little, and looked out from the inside to see her beloved. Immediately the view suddenly opens up. The girls, who have woken up early and are wearing light make-up, are in a state of laughter, occasionally raising their sleeves to shield themselves from the morning breeze. The contrast between the laughter of the past and the silence of the present highlights the sense of things being different. In the third paragraph, the allusion to "Liu Lang's re-arrival" emphasises again that things are different and naturally leads to the following behaviour of searching for old friends. The author visited the neighbours to know that only Qiu Niang still stays in the area. The author remembers the poems written to them in the past days, but the girls are no longer known to be married to whom. The author contrasts the depression and prosperity of the present and the past, and it is covered with a strong sense of "sadness and separation". Finally, the words return to the scenery in front of the eyes. Under the slanting sun, the willow branches twisted in the wind, touching the feeling of sadness. The author rode back until evening, leaving behind the melancholy courtyard and "a curtain of wind and catkin". The spring scenery of the present is again contrasted with emphasising the feeling of loneliness in the heart. The isolation of the present and the past reinforces the tragedy that the past is unrecoverable.

## 2.2 Twisting and changing Xiaoling

Xiaoling refers to short and light Ci-poems, usually less than 58 words. Therefore, the space for the author's narrative and lyricism is very limited, and it is easy to fall into excessive abstract lyricism or flat narrative. Although there are some simple and straightforward parts in the Qingzhen Ci, Zhou has also made them as convoluted and varied as possible<sup>[4]</sup>. Because of the limitations, Zhou could not give a detailed account of the events but could only select two episodes that corresponded to each other, creating a structure that overlapped the present and the past. The sense of stop and stuck is emphasised in the contrasting changes between the present and the past, especially when the present and the past do not change as envisaged. The strong contrast in the plot of the fragment emphasises the sense of dislocation in life caused by the change of circumstances, from which the author expresses the disillusionment of the demise of life and expresses the loss of reality<sup>[5]</sup>.

For example, Spring in Jade Pavilion contains a story, but the author does not tell the beginning and the end in detail. In the first two sentences, "Peach Stream" and "Autumn Lotus Root" seem to describe the spring and autumn scenery, but the author narrates a love story. The word "Peach Stream" is an allusion to the love between immortals and mortals. The first sentence suggests that the author had a love affair, but it did not last long. The sentence has a sense of regret and remorse, but the author uses the allusion to gently pass it, successfully avoiding the Ci turning into an emotive complaint. Then the author uses "lotus root" (藕) to compare to "couple" (偶) because these two characters have the same pronunciation in Chinese. The lotus root stem is broken and will never be restored as before, which is a metaphor for the love that was once completely broken and difficult to continue the previous relationship. It emotionally follows the regret and remorse of the first sentence. The third and fourth sentences focus on the narrative as

the author reminisces at the "Chilan Bridge". In the past, they waited for each other on the bridge, and the mood should have been one of anticipation and exultation. Now he is left to wander alone on the leafy road reminiscing about the sweetness. It is still the same bridge, but the state of mind of the people on the bridge has been turned upside down. Meanwhile, "Chilan Bridge" and "Yellow Leaf Road" are different names for the same place, referring to the two seasons of spring and autumn, respectively, and echoing the first two sentences to form a circular structure. The next two sentences are about the scenery. A few words outline a clear evening in late autumn. These two lines are also very attractive in terms of the contrast between scenery and emotion. Green hills of silence correspond to the lone figure on the bridge, and the strong contrast between the large and the small highlights the loneliness. The goose, a living creature, breathes life into the whole still picture, but it will soon fly away with the setting sun on its back, and the twilight will quickly turn to night. The whole process is like this love affair of the author, which falls without a trace immediately after its splendour. The last two sentences completely turn to lyricism. The person who has passed away is just like the clouds that drift into the river with the wind, but the author's love is just like the catkin glued to the ground by the rain. At the same time, it also shows the author's struggle and can not get rid of the anguish and confusion. As far as possible, a sentence can be both lyrical and narrative or scenic and lyrical. The back-and-forth narration between the present and the past gives a three-dimensional, flowing structural framework to the heavy emotions in this Xiaoling [8].

It is undeniable that the circular chapter structure is reflected in both Mancu and Xiaoling and has become a common phenomenon. The time and space of the Qingzhen Ci are not depicted sequentially, nor is it a simple writing of scenery, followed by narration, and finally ending with lyricism, but rather, it shows the superposition of scenery, narration, and lyricism, which makes the overall chapters freer and more harmonious.

### 3 The Language of Straight and Narrow

The language of Qingzhen Ci has been the focus of much attention and criticism and has attracted many glances through the centuries. Xia Jinguan commented on Zhou Bangyan: "Using the Six Dynasties' mini-essay composition method, the narrative is spread out layer by layer. The scenes and emotion are compatible with each other, and the words are always unrelenting [9]." 7变9

#### 3.1 Smooth and natural straight writing

For anyone who reads the Qingzhen Ci for the first time, the overwhelming feeling must be one of freshness and fluency and ease and naturalness. There is no deliberate hardness in succession between sentences, and the whole story is told with layers and layers of progress, which appropriately guides the reader's thoughts with sincere emotion and creates empathy between the reader and the author<sup>[10]</sup>. For example, the Ci called 'Waterbag Dance' starts with the curling smoke burning in the incense burner,

intended to ward off the hot and humid heat, which is the view of the house as the writer sees it when he has just woken up. Outside the window, birds chirped as if discussing the fine weather; this movement turned the author's eyes from the incense burner inside the house to the eaves of the house and then naturally extended to the lotus leaves outside the house, moving with the wind. The rising sun shines on the leaves, drying the rainwater left on the lotus leaves at night. The pond's water surface is clear, and the wind blows over the lotus flowers as if, through the text, the reader can still smell the fragrance of the lotus flowers wrapped in water vapour. As a native of Hangzhou, through the lotus leaves and flowers in front of him, the author, who has lived in Chang'an for a long time, naturally recalls the lotus ponds in his hometown, so the next paragraph turns to miss his distant hometown, but the mountains are high, and the roads are far away so that he can only return to his hometown in his dreams. The author does not continue to write about how much he misses his hometown here but converses with the fisherman from his remembered hometown across time and space, asking him whether he remembers him, which highlights the feelings of homesickness in a reverse way in the rebuke. Readers follow the description of the text when enjoying the scenery, experiencing a touch of homesickness. The homesickness is sorrowful but not resentful, light like a veil, as if the scene is in front of the eyes with a layer of hazy filters. Between the real and the unreal, the scene in front of the eyes and the scene of the hometown combine into one.

### 3.2 Elaborate allusions

The use of allusion is also a feature of Qingzhen Ci <sup>[11]</sup>. Allusions are generally categorised into two types: discourse and factual allusions <sup>[12]</sup>. The sources of factual allusions in Qingzhen Ci are mostly myths and histories. For example, *Watching the Southern Shore* has a sentence describing a female hairstyle, in which it is mentioned that there is a kind of hair accessory called "Jade Swallow", which is the name of a hairpin from a myth. The *Cave Notes* recorded the arrival of the goddess leaving a jade hairpin; years later, the box was opened with white swallows flying to the sky, and then the people in the palace imitated this hairpin and named it Jade Swallow. Historical allusions, such as the sentence "The heart in the sound of the zither, the brocade characters woven on the handkerchief" in "The First of the Di State", make use of the love story between Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun, as well as the allusion to Dou Tao's wife, Su Shi, in the *Tale of the Martyrs*.

The discourse can be seen in the use of previous poems, and Zhou Bangyan's ability to make these lines serve the current word context while retaining their original meanings can be considered a masterpiece <sup>[2]</sup>. For example, in "Unforgettable", in which: "The shadows of the cicadas move in low hair, and the fragrance of the lipstick can be smelled when she whispers (低鬟蝉影动, 私语口脂香)." These two sentences are written about the woman's dainty attitude, her hair ornaments swinging back and forth with the movement of her body, and the fragrance of the rouge on her mouth can be smelled when she lies down and whispers in her husband's ear. The first sentence is from a poem by Yuan Zhen written about women named Huizhen. This sentence is still written about women. In Zhang Sheng's eyes, when walking, Huizhen is light and agile.

The footsteps that were originally far away suddenly turned back, and her elegant figure seemed to make the dust under her feet look like jade. Zhou Bangyan borrows the first half of the sentence to describe the courtesan in his own work, but surprisingly there is no sense of rawness. The phrase "whispering" is borrowed from Gu Xiong's "Gan Zhou Zi", which originally describes how the wife exhales like an orchid when the husband and wife are talking in low tones on the bed. Zhou Bangyan appropriated the second half of the sentence into the erotic lyrics. On the contrary, he portrayed the image of an extremely attractive courtesan, and the rouge fragrance at this time was more like a deliberate tease. Although "Unforgettable" is an erotic Ci, the words are erotic but not demonic. In just a few words, the courtesan's gestures, movements and character are portrayed to the fullest extent. Similarly, the words "cut the candles in the west window together with the honey torch(共剪西窗蜜炬)" in "Lychee Fragrance" are also modelled on the sentences "When we cut the candles in the west window together(何当共剪西窗烛)" in a famous Tang poet Li Shangyin's "Sending to the North in the Night Rain"(夜雨寄北), and "the honey torch rots with a thousand branches(蜜炬千枝烂)", which was created by Li He, another Tang poet. The former is written about a scene in which the characters, in their longing for each other, imagine cutting candle flowers with each other at a future reunion. The latter scene is about drunken drinking all night long, with the candles in the room burning all night long. Zhou Bangyan took the connotation of the former and the latter's elegant name for candles and replaced "candle(烛)" with "honey torch(蜜炬)". To do so not only conforms to the rhythmic requirements of the Cipai but also adds some scholarly flavor, showing Zhou Bangyan's high literary literacy and portraying the image of a lovesick woman in a single sentence.

### 3.3 Elegantly crafted words and phrases

After the overall perception, the reader will certainly pay attention to the wording of the Qingzhen Ci, and many scholars give the comment that they are richly coloured and refined, elegantly sculpted, but not revealing<sup>[12]</sup>. For example, in "Lanling King - Willow," written in spring, Zhou depicts the courtesan Li Shishi coming to see him off when he was deposed and left the capital. Willow leaves, soft and green as smoke, stay on the embankment. The word "willow" is often associated with "staying" in China, which is also a manifestation of the imagery-narrative method of Qingzhen Ci<sup>[13]</sup>. Written from the willow but not for the praise of the willow, "playing with the willow leaves" is in order to lead to the following send-off on the Sui embankment<sup>[14]</sup>. The word "silk(丝丝)", pronounced "si si" in Chinese, is used to describe both the slender swaying willow branches and the lingering feeling of parting. The sentence "Sui embankment" points out the theme of farewell, the willow tree has not changed, but the scenes of farewell are frequently performed. The words "Changting Road" and "Sui embankment" echo each other<sup>[14]</sup>. "Years gone by" and "Have seen a few times" echo each other<sup>[14]</sup>. They are all paving the way for the words "capital city weary guest"<sup>[14]</sup>. Others write here the next set must express the indignation of the weary guest, but Zhou Bangyan's second paragraph is unique. He writes about the scene in front of the eyes

and embellishes the sadness in the scene. Drinking wine with grief, the author can not help worrying about leaving with the fast wind, the fast boat, and the road is distant; the people are far away. The word "grief" runs through the four sentences, and it is the emotional centre of the second paragraph. These four sentences add imagination using exaggeration. The wind is as fast as an arrow shot out just a moment after setting off; when Zhou looks back, the one sending off is already on the edge of the sky. The third paragraph is mainly about people. As he moves away, the farewell docks and the "slanting sun" form a new beautiful and tragic scene. When the emotions explode, Zhou uses memory to pull the rhythm and finally falls into the "contemplation", deeper than the word "remember", all the emotions received in the teardrops.

Most people pay attention to the combination of straight and curved expressions in their creations, and use words with discretion, but few people can blend the straight and curved expressions without any traces like Zhou Bangyan so that the whole Ci-poem remains smooth and harmonious. At the same time, Zhou Bangyan's clever use of allusions in his Ci-poems and previous poems show the beauty of elegance and refinement.

#### 4 Expression of emotions in the context of events

Zhou Bangyan's outstanding feature in expression is his ability to mix strong emotions into the narrative. Thanks to the circular chapter structure, he has more space to narrate when writing Ci and succeeds in unifying lyricism, scenery writing, and narration organically. Qingzhen Ci-poems are subtle and introverted in their lyricism, with deep and hidden emotions in the words and a twisted and euphemistic way of expression <sup>[15]</sup>. The Manci in the Qingzhen Ci is often used to lay out the narrative, starting from the scene, followed by the narrative, lyricism, and finally, back to the scene <sup>[16]</sup>. For example, in "Auspicious Dragon Chant", the author's joy of revisiting the "Zhangtai Road" continues into the joyful scenes of laughter in his memories. The impact of the few scenes in front of the author inevitably makes people feel lost and despondent. Memories trigger the pity of the former no longer living there again. Finally, the text ends up in the present day, and the feeling of autumnal melancholy quietly increases. The whole Ci uses the scenery to drive the feelings and uses the emotional colours as a bridge to connect the memories and the present. The narrative changes with the scenery. Each recollection is inspired by the scene in front of the eyes. The emotions change with the events, stumbling back and forth between joy, despondency, and loss <sup>[17]</sup>.

Xiaoling is short in length and easily weak in creation, but the Xiaoling in the Qingzhen Ci often starts very heavily, with a pre-emptive fragmentary narrative that later forms a vaguely visible thread <sup>[4]</sup>. For example, "Wandering White Young" starts with the narrative detail of lovers sharing an orange. Zhou focuses on the moment when the woman's delicate hand breaks through the orange peel. Immediately after this enters the whole scene of the construction: the magnificent tent hangs low, and the curling smoke rises from the incense burner, bringing up the warmth of the air. The tenderness of lovers hovered throughout the house like wisps of smoke. The whole Ci intercepts three scenes from the lovers' interaction, eating oranges, tuning the Sheng, and per-



suading the man to stay. As to how they met, what else they said during the meeting, and whether or not they stayed at night, these are all left to the reader's imagination. This way of writing gives the limited length of the Xiaoling more space for expression.

Zhou Bangyan was at the key point of Song Ci changing from vulgarity to elegance and already paid attention to the tension and relaxation of the way of emotional expression<sup>[15]</sup>. The characteristic of swallowing expression is more obvious in Xiaoling. Because of the limitation of the length, the more blank-leaving, the more obvious the benefit of expression with a long rhythm.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, the aesthetic characteristics of Qingzhen Ci are explained in three parts: chapter structure, linguistic features and expression. It is useful for constructing an overall cognitive framework of Qingzhen Ci and serves as a guide for those who read them for the first time. At the same time, for those who want to research further on the aesthetic characteristics, this paper can be used as an inspiring outline, which can be selected from any one of the three sections for in-depth breakthroughs.

The Qingzhen Ci enjoyed a great reputation in the Northern Song Dynasty, directly influencing the style of the Southern Song's graceful and restrained poetic genres, and many literati in the later generations took the Qingzhen Ci as a model of graceful and restrained poetic genres. Firstly, Zhou Bangyan built up a circular structure, expanding the narrative and lyrical breadth of the words. Secondly, Zhou Bangyan's colourful and elegant expressions erected a monument on the road of Song lyrics' elegance. Thirdly, it is good at narrating so that the feeling rises and falls with the events, which successfully dissolves the sense of separation between narrating and lyricism.

However, this paper is still limited. First of all, many Cipai have been lost. There is no complete music score. Zhou Bangyan was also a great master of music and rhythm, and he paid great attention to the compatibility of rhythm and words in the process of composing Ci, so it is a great pity that the beauty of the music of Qingzhen Ci could not be analysed from music and rhythm. Furthermore, this paper is only a general overview and actually ignores many unique details, so the next study can start to fill in the research gaps.

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